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A life of refusal.

Winnie Madikizela-Mandela and violence in South Africa

Introduction

One of the most troubling questions arising from struggles against oppression is how to understand the nature of political violence. Although violence is a persistent feature of colonial conquest and the spread of capitalism, its uses by revolutionary movements are always a matter of ethical and strategic debate. Under what conditions is violence justified, who are legitimate targets, and what are the implications of the use of violence for the societies in whose name liberation is pursued?

In South African liberation movements, the question of armed struggle was highly contentious. The Pan Africanist Congress formed a military wing, Poqo, in 1960 and the African National Congress followed with the formation of Umkhonto we Sizwe in 1961. These decisions led to divisions between those who chose violent insurrection over non-violent methods of political change. However, not all revolutionary political violence in South Africa was contained within these official structures. By its nature, the legitimization of violent insurrection created the space in which many people could act in the name of revolution even though the lines of party authorization were unclear. This problem was especially complicated by the 1980s, when it seemed that the boundaries between acts of violence that had a clear political intention and target, and those that might be considered primarily criminal became somewhat porous. The increasing repression by the state, and the emergence of multiple forms of violent challenge not only to the state but also to black

people who were considered by activists to be collaborators with the state, altered the debates about political violence.

In these debates, the role of women in political violence is thinly addressed. Where women were implicated in acts of political violence, they were considered to be exceptional within a dominant framing of maternalism in nationalist historiography. This portrays women as the peace-able wing of political movement; even in instances when they are not passive, then they are interpreted as being peace-makers. The imagery of women as the mothers of the nation deploys essentialist ideas of women as caring and nurturing, reluctantly dragged into politics as a result of the attacks on their men by a cruel system. This kind of master narrative does not easily accommodate analyses of actions by women who do not fall easily into the nationalist tropes.¹ By contrast, several feminist histories have presented an alternative picture of women as political agents, consciously engaging in collective movements and choosing strategies to address the various dimensions of power –not just relations of race but also of class, gender and sexuality.² Even in these histories, however, the issue of women's uses of violent techniques of politics remains under-researched, if at all. Women are much more likely to be seen as the victims of violence, and particularly of sexual and domestic violence, than as perpetrators.

In this context, the case of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's complicities with violent political strategies is particularly interest-

¹ Bina D'Costa, *Nationbuilding, gender and war crimes in South Asia*, New York, Routledge, 2011; Srila Roy, *Remembering revolution: gender, violence and subjectivity in India's Naxalbari movement*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2012; Tamara Shefer, *Intersections of "race", sex and gender in narratives on apartheid*, in Garth Stevens, Norman Duncan, Derek Hook (eds.) *Race, memory and the apartheid archive*, Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2014.

² For an account of the history of the South African women's movement up to the 1960s see Cherryl Walker, *Women and resistance in South Africa*, London, Onyx Press, 1982, and for the period 1979-2004, see Shireen Hassim, *Women's organizations and democracy in South Africa: contesting authority*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2006. The issue of maternalism in South African politics is treated as problematic from a feminist perspective in Shireen Hassim, Jo Metelerkamp, Alison Todes, *A bit on the side? Gender struggles and the politics of transformation in South Africa*, «Transformation», 5, 1987, pp. 3-32. Maternalism is treated more sympathetically as a mode of political action that enabled the involvement of ordinary women in national liberation by Amanda Kemp, Nozizwe Madlala, Asha Moodley, Elaine Salo, *The dawn of a new day: redefining South African feminisms*, in Amrita Basu (ed.), *The challenge of local feminisms. Women's movements in comparative perspective*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1995, pp. 131-162, and Gertrude Fester, *Women's organizations in the Western Cape. Vehicles for gender struggle or instruments of subordination?*, «Agenda», 34, 1997, pp. 45-61.

ing. Madikizela-Mandela is one of the most prominent women in the South African liberation struggle, the ultimate “mother of the nation”.³ During the late 1960s, she developed an underground network, acting as a satellite cell of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) in Soweto. Although not highly successful in launching insurgent actions, Madikizela-Mandela identified as a member of MK.⁴ During the late 1980s she was accused of participating in or authorising heinous acts of violence against young black men who were sheltering in her home in Soweto. As I discuss below, the accusations were politically explosive within the anti-apartheid movement.

In this article, I return to these allegations against Winnie Madikizela-Mandela in order to understand Madikizela-Mandela’s own motivations and explanation for the use of physical discipline against young activists. I am interested in whether the maternalist stereotypes of women as political activists stand up to the actual forms in which women may act. In this case, I am interested in the disjuncture between the imaginary of the mother of the nation as a nurturing figure, and the ways in which Winnie Madikizela-Mandela herself acted as a disciplining force, using her power as leader of a political movement in a variety of registers, not all of which may be encompassed in maternalist explanations. Her actions, I argue, both destabilized maternalist imagery and reconstituted forms of violent masculinity, an entanglement that offers new ways of thinking about Madikizela-Mandela’s portrayal in political histories. I am most concerned, though, with how Winnie Madikizela-Mandela accounted for her actions in her own words and on her own terms. These accounts are reconstructed from her interviews and texts, as well as from her testimony to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1997.

Political context

By the mid-1980s, South Africa was enflamed in a civil war between the state and a range of forces opposing apartheid: resurgent

³ For an excellent feminist analysis of the complex biography of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, see Sheila Meintjes, *Winnie Madikizela-Mandela: tragic figure? Populist tribune? Township tough?*, «Southern Africa Report», 1998, n. 4, pp. 14-30. Meintjes highlights Madikizela-Mandela’s resilience as a political actor, and the importance of nationalism in the portrayal of her role in politics.

⁴ Tom Lodge, *Mandela: A Critical Life*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 144.

trade unions, a new and powerful array of community, women's and civic organisations, a national coalition of pro-democracy movements known as the United Democratic Front and, outside the country, the African National Congress and the Pan Africanist Congress. So powerful had the movements against apartheid become that the state rapidly depleted its capacity to stem the demands for democracy. In July 1985 the state imposed a limited state of emergency in certain districts. This was lifted in March 1986, only to be re-imposed in a more draconian form nationwide in June 1986. The attempts at containment of opposition through invoking extraordinary laws allowing the police to act against political activists, outlawing public gatherings and imposing a ban on news broadcasts were the last kicks of a dying regime. Within four years, the process of negotiating a new settlement for a political transition to democracy had begun, and not long after that the first fully inclusive elections in South Africa's history were held, leading to the installation of Nelson Mandela as the president.

The 1980s were a crucial decade for reasons pertinent to the ways in which we might understand Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's actions. Arbitrary and violent attacks on activists by the state, including imprisonment without trial and torture and murder, met with increasingly violent responses by political activists. The state itself orchestrated violence between political organisations through a so-called "third force".⁵ Norman Duncan shows that the number of deaths from political violence increased dramatically during this period, rising from 879 in 1985 to 3699 in 1990.⁶ The state bore much of the responsibility for these deaths, as Duncan argues. Yet a troubling feature of violence emerged in response to state repression, in which the targets were not the state per se, but people within black townships who were collaborators in the apartheid system of ruling, such as local councilors, or residents who did not support political strategies such as consumer boycotts, or indeed a variety of perceived enemies. It remains a matter of conjecture whether such actions were authorized by MK or the political structures of the

⁵ Brandon Hamber, Sharon Lewis, *An overview of the consequences of violence and trauma in South Africa*, Johannesburg, Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 1997.

⁶ Norman Duncan, *Understanding collective violence in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa*, p. 6, available at <www.unisa.ac.za/contents/faculties/humanities/sosw/docs/ASPJ-2005/ASPJ2005-3-1-02-Original-contributions.-Understanding-Collective.pdf> (10/2014).

ANC, but their effect was to create a context in which revolutionary violence was seen to encompass direct attacks on individuals.

Mandela was released from twenty-seven years of imprisonment in 1990. During the period of his imprisonment, Mandela became a political symbol of the resistance – deliberately constructed as such by the various movements against apartheid. Mandela’s own leadership qualities undoubtedly facilitated his availability and desirability as a heroic symbol, but the personalization of resistance in the figure of Mandela was also a political strategy, aimed in part at the building of an international anti-apartheid solidarity movement. Cast as the heroic figure of noble opposition, and fuelled by his deliberate invisibilisation by the state (for example, no pictures of Mandela were allowed and no speeches or written texts could be reported), Mandela was cast as an icon, a hollowed-out representation of the nationalist father of the nation, the leader in whose name resisters could act. He was a political messiah, one whose incarceration itself signified the imprisonment of all black people in a repressive system and whose liberation symbolized the moment of freedom.⁷

Yet Mandela could not have functioned as this kind of icon without the figure of his wife, Winnie Mandela:⁸ the correlate mother of the nation, the woman through whom Mandela could be reached and whose every visit to her husband on Robben Island was watched for a political signal. For ANC activists, the Robben Island visits were politically important: What message did Mandela have for the nation? Did he support this or that strategy? Was he proud of his nation? Prison visits by Winnie and her daughters Zindzi and Zenani were avidly reported on in the media, the prison restrictions on her access analysed and familiar pictures of her en route to the Island became routine. Throughout his incarceration, Winnie stood in for Nelson, sometimes acting as his ventriloquist and at other times using the space that the iconic status created to advance a political position of her own.

“Nelson and Winnie” thus became a political trope, the recurring image of the stable centre in a political vortex. They represented the naturalised and idealized modern heterosexual patriarchal family, and their public roles were enacted without regard to the inconven-

⁷ For a discussion of the development of this iconography, see Lodge, *Mandela*, pp.190-194.

⁸ Until her divorce from Nelson Mandela in 1995, Winnie used the surname “Mandela”. After her divorce, she added her birth surname to her name and thereafter is referred to as Winnie Madikizela-Mandela.

ient facts of their relationship.⁹ Their separation by incarceration became a metaphor for the separation through forced migration of many families in South Africa. Winnie Mandela's role in the public sphere was defined for her: she was to be the helpmate of a political leader. She was to be the Mother of the Nation, supporter of men and wise counsel to youth, the keeper of the home from which her husband had been so unjustly banished (like millions of other South African men), to be both brave and vulnerable at the same time. She symbolized the epitome of African womanhood under apartheid. It was a role that Winnie initially accepted, perhaps not entirely aware of the full ramifications that would follow.

When Winnie Madikizela met Nelson, she was a young and beautiful social worker with no history of political activism, and he was the older, established member of the new black political elite, a married lawyer and father with standing in the nationalist movement sweeping across the country. Both had migrated from rural Transkei to Johannesburg in search of a different life. Winnie moved to Johannesburg at the age of 17 to study social work and then to take up a position as the first black medical social worker at Baragwanath Hospital. Soon after she arrived in Johannesburg, she met the dashing Nelson Mandela who was by this time separated from his wife Evelyn. Winnie and Nelson were married in 1958, had two daughters of their own, and after six short years together Nelson was sentenced to life imprisonment. By this stage, she was inextricably involved in the national liberation movement.

The dichotomy between the two lovers is part of the romanticized gendered story of their relationship. Winnie is presented in nationalist iconography as an ingénue, a political naïf who relied on her beauty and charisma rather than her political insights.¹⁰ But there is an important clue to her character that is frequently overlooked. Born, like Nelson, in a rural village in the Transkei, Winnie's migration is barely touched upon, as though her journey and ambitions were insignificant. Two of her biographers, Emma Gilbey and Anne Marie du Preez Bezdrob describe Winnie's birth as being a disappointment to her family as she was yet another girl child.¹¹ Bezdrob

⁹ These included Nelson's previous marriage and reputed neglect of his first wife Evelyn, who lived a rural life very different to Nelson's urban world and various infidelities on the part of Winnie.

¹⁰ See, for example, Anne Benjamin (ed.), *Winnie Mandela: part of my soul went with him*, New York, W.W. Norton and Company, 1984.

¹¹ Emma Gilbey, *The lady: the life and times of Winnie Mandela*, New York, Vin-

notes: «Little could the Madikizelas have known that the tiny girl to whom they had given such a miserly welcome would become an icon of twentieth century South Africa, and leave an imprint larger and more important than any woman –or Madikizela male– on the country’s history». ¹² Indeed she had turned down a scholarship that would have enabled her to study in the United States in order to stay in South Africa and participate in the struggle against apartheid. If she had not been particularly active before, once she married Nelson she was thrust into the centre of the struggle. From then on, she was constantly under scrutiny and subjected to various forms of repression by the state.

Making the Mother of the Nation

With Nelson imprisoned on Robben Island, both were aware that their marriage would not be an ordinary one. Instead, they cast it romantically as embodying the nation’s struggle for freedom. Writing to Winnie, who was in detention, in June 1969, Nelson quoted from one of her letters to him:

Most people do not realize that your physical presence would have meant nothing to me if the ideals for which you have dedicated your life have not been realized. I find living in hope the most wonderful thing. Our short lives together, my love, have always been full of expectation [...]. In these hectic and violent years I have grown to love you more than I ever did before [...]. Nothing can be as valuable as being part and parcel of the formation of the history of a country. ¹³

The sense of a larger purpose to their personal relationship that is captured in this excerpt was felt within the ANC as well. The strategy of focusing on the figure of Nelson Mandela as the centerpiece of a global anti-apartheid movement emerged from 1980, and figuring Winnie as the centerpiece of the story was core to the project. ¹⁴

tag, 1994; Anne Marie du Preez Bezdrob, *Winnie Mandela: a life*, Cape Town, Zebra Press, 2003.

¹² Bezdrob, *Winnie Mandela*, p. 13.

¹³ Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, *419 days prisoner number 1323/ 69*, Johannesburg, Picador, 2013, p. 103.

¹⁴ During the late 1970s and the early 1980s, Winnie Mandela worked not only within the African National Congress but also in alliance with organisations

As resistance intensified in the mid-1980s, a collection of Winnie Mandela's letters and interviews was published as a memoir entitled, *Winnie Mandela: part of my soul went with him*.¹⁵ In the introduction to the book, Bishop Manas Buthelezi describes Winnie as a representative figure. «Through the story of her own life we are able to read the story of many others. Winnie is therefore a role model/ heroine whom many people have emulated in their perseverance in the struggle for liberation. She has been the inspiring spirit of her own people». ¹⁶ Winnie herself is quoted in the foreword as saying «it is not she who is important, but the struggle». ¹⁷

Winnie Mandela's status as mother of the nation grew rapidly in the early 1980s, directed in part by the African National Congress's deliberate presentation of her as its public face. She was also an activist though –she says in her interview with Malou von Sivers that she was put into the position of “wife of” but that she saw herself very much as an activist in her own right.¹⁸ Mechthild Nagel –describing South Africa as a «carceral society»– notes that African prison narratives relegate women to «the roles of stoic mothers and wives who silently endure and support their son's or husband's endeavor to advance the cause of liberation of the people» even though in reality women are by no means passive bystanders.¹⁹

In fact, Madikizela-Mandela claimed in the interview with von Sivers that she provoked the attention of security police so that she could keep the Mandela name in the public eye, she exposed herself continually to danger as a political strategy. Her home was repeatedly invaded and searched, and she was arrested several times, imprisoned and tortured. Then, in 1977, in an act of extreme cruelty, she was served with a banishment order to a place in the Free State called Brandfort –a place she had never heard of nor had she ever

that were to the left of the African National Congress and sometimes in critical opposition to nationalism. For example, she was a powerful public supporter of the black consciousness movement led by Steve Biko, and of the Black People's Convention, a movement that was independent of the African National Congress (see Meintjes, *Winnie Madikizela-Mandela*).

¹⁵ Benjamin (ed.), *Winnie Mandela*.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

¹⁸ Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, *Interview with Malou von Sivers*, broadcast by Swedish TV channel 4, November 1999, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wq_ax-QthHrY (July/2014).

¹⁹ Mechthild Nagel, “*I write what I like*”: *African prison intellectuals and the struggle for freedom*, «Journal of Pan African Studies», 2008, n. 3, p. 75.

visited. It was a horrendous uprooting from her family and community in Soweto, a form of exile that she described as «my little Siberia».²⁰ Madikizela-Mandela was defiant. She invoked her status as representative of the ANC.

When they send me into exile, it's not me as an individual they are sending. They think that with me they can also ban the political ideas. But that is a historic impossibility. They will never succeed in doing that. I am of no importance to them as an individual. What I stand for is what they want to banish. I couldn't think of a greater honour.²¹

In 1985, while she was on a visit to Johannesburg, Madikizela-Mandela's Brandfort house was burnt down. She was never to return. She settled again in Soweto and her house became not only her residence and that of her family, but also that of an extensive network of activists.

Rumours that Madikizela-Mandela had regularly “disciplined” by physical force children living in her household circulated in activist circles for some time in the 1980s. This was the most infamous phase of her life, when she returned from her banishment in Brandfort to her home in Soweto and set up and harboured a gang of young men known as the Mandela United Football Club. During this period, Madikizela-Mandela's status shifted from being the object of (state) violence to being the source of violence against members of her own community. Late in December 1988, a group of four teenagers were abducted by members of the club from the Methodist manse in Soweto, under the guise that the minister, Reverend Paul Verryn, had sexually abused residents. They were taken to the Mandela residence, where they were beaten. One of the four teenagers, Stompie Seipei, disappeared and his dead body was later found in a field with signs of severe physical trauma. Mrs Madikizela-Mandela's doctor, Dr Abu Asvat, who had examined one of the young men supposedly sexually assaulted by Rev Verryn, was shot in his surgery in an apparent robbery in the same week. The coach of the Mandela United Football Club, Jerry Richardson, was found guilty of the murder of Stompie Seipei. Two men unrelated to Madikizela-Madela were convicted for the murder of Dr Asvat

²⁰ Saleem Badat, *The forgotten people: political banishment under apartheid*, Johannesburg, Jacana, 2012, p. 212.

²¹ Badat, *The forgotten people*, p. 211.

amid rumours that they had acted at Madikizela-Mandela's behest. In a second trial, Winnie Mandela was charged with kidnapping and accessory after the fact to assault along with her driver John Morgan and Xoliswa Falati. She was found guilty, and sentenced to six years imprisonment. On appeal the assault conviction fell away.

In the trial, it emerged that two other young men, also accused of being informers, had been brutally assaulted by members of the Mandela United Football Club. They had been held down and on one man the letter "M" was carved into his chest and «Viva ANC» carved on his thigh with a pen knife. Battery acid was then poured over the wound. First Madikizela-Mandela, and then her daughter Zindzi, were accused of overseeing this attack. Nothing was proven but residents in Soweto reported living in terror.

The allegations of abuse in her own home came not long after Madikizela-Mandela began to openly support direct violent action in several speeches made in the townships of South Africa, justified as an ethical action in the context of repression. In 1985 she declared:

I will speak to you of violence [...]. I will tell you why we are violent. It is because those who oppress us are violent. The Afrikaner knows only one language: the language of violence. The white man will not hand over power in talks around a table [...]. Therefore, all that is left to us is the painful process of violence.²²

The most well-known of these statements was her support of necklacing, a particularly brutal form of punishment in which a burning tyre was placed around the necks of people who were suspected of being informers, or who had crossed a picket or boycott line. In April 1986, in the township of Munsieville, she announced: «Together, hand in hand, with our boxes of matches and our necklaces, we shall liberate this country».²³ Necklacing was a method that was decidedly not supported by the ANC, who used violent methods against the police and military targets and officially eschewed violence against civilians and especially against black people. At the time, furthermore, it was politically inopportune for Winnie Madikizela-Mandela to be making such a statement as it went against the careful strategy that was being pursued of present-

²² Bezdrob, *Winnie Mandela*, p. 220.

²³ *Ibidem*.

ing Nelson Mandela as the non-violent and just leader of a noble resistance movement.

These events were to provoke a rift between Madikizela-Mandela and the United Democratic Front, and the formation of a Crisis Committee of senior political activists to attempt to restrain Madikizela-Mandela. Ultimately, these allegations against Madikizela-Mandela as well as the public airing of her affair with a young activist lawyer formed part of the basis of the divorce between Nelson and Winnie Mandela.

Finding the personal in narratives of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's accounts of violence

Seeking out Madikizela-Mandela's own explanations for her actions and her motivations, even those that are self-justifying, is not an easy methodological task. The challenge in researching these events is posed by the very fact of Madikizela-Mandela's hyper-visibility in the public sphere, and the awareness that she herself is constantly constructing her life story in the full glare of an international audience. She is hyper-visible, her movements recorded by the police and by the media, she speaks often and yet her words are often carefully curated for political effect. Winnie Mandela is much written about and has been interviewed countless times throughout the world. She has been the subject of at least three biographies, a biopic, and several documentaries, all of which are based in part on an archive that includes multiple interviews. Two major texts portray her life in her words, although neither can be easily defined as autobiographies. The first, entitled *Part of my soul*, is more properly an edited collection of interviews and texts. The editor, Anne Benjamin, notes that «This is not an autobiography in the conventional sense. The restrictions placed on her activities by the government and her daily involvement in the liberation movement make it impossible for Winnie Mandela to sit down and write a book».²⁴ Mandela did not even see the manuscript before it went into print. The second is an account of a period of imprisonment in the 1960s, published in 2013 and called simply *491 days*. She has presented multiple narratives of her life in a multiplicity of forms. She has voice, although it is not clear that the voice acts as the bridge between personal understanding and action. There is no single chronological, histori-

²⁴ Benjamin (ed.), *Winnie Mandela*, p. 7.

cal narrative in which we might locate her turn to violence. Rather, Madikizela-Mandela's accounts are episodic and mediated both by the particular political context in which she is speaking as well as by the interviewer's questions. We are thus presented with an archive of fragments for interpretation.

If all personal narratives are mediated by context – by their temporality and their purpose – then the personal narrative of a woman at the centre of a political movement in a country on the cusp of revolution is more complicated than most. The personal story narrated against the background of a nationalist political project must be treated with special care, as its very crafting is a deliberate rhetorical strategy. The narratives of a prominent political actor cannot be read separately from the political; it is, pre-eminently, reading nation through the life of one exemplary actor. Perhaps, indeed, it is a case of an individual narrating her life as the canvas on which to imagine the nation.

Intimacy, that aspect of a life that is revealed in a personal narrative, is always fraught in its portrayal. It is often in the revelation of the intimate – of feelings, longings, fears – that we are able to fully grasp the extent to which any individual experiences their own sense of capability to act. In the case of a prominent political figure, the personal details of a life provide the crucial link between private and political. These details have the revelatory capacity to show how a seemingly ordinary person, “one of us”, can shape history. In both senses, though – whether as the individual writ large or the nation reduced to its intimate representation – the narratives of politicians are crucial in shaping our understanding of political events. In this case, what may be revealed is some part of an answer to the question of whether violence is justified in the pursuit of revolutionary goals and what the personal costs might be of using violent techniques from the perspective of the user of violence – sometimes referred to as the perpetrator. And, in the context of gendered constructions of women's political activities are generally directed towards peace, could the story of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela help us to understand the potential for violence inherent in maternalism?

Research for this article thus began with the question: what can Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's personal narrative reveal about the motivations for violence undertaken as part of a revolutionary struggle? The *fact* of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's implication in kidnapping and assault had already been established; she had been found guilty in a court of law in 1991. But the questions of *why* Winnie had turned to violence, what circumstances might explain the

actions she undertook, and what the costs of such actions were in terms of her self-definition of herself as a woman leader remain unanswered. Personal narratives and life stories have the potent ability to explicate agency, to cast light on what the possibilities for actions might appear to be to protagonists and to show why (even if not to excuse) certain choices were made and not others. As Portelli puts it, through life history narratives we might grasp the ways in which «each person entertains, in each moment, multiple possible destinies, perceives different possibilities, and makes different choices from others in the same situation».²⁵ Might we find a set of motivations for or justifications of violence that would get us beyond the accounts of widespread violence in South Africa in the 1980s which focus on violence as the automatic reaction to state repression? In particular, how might the account of a women leader steeped in the mythology of maternalism force a different type of reading of the forms of agency of women in political movements?

I hoped to construct this personal perspective through a careful examination of Winnie Madikizela's account of this period in her appearance before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1997. The Commission was an opportunity for Madikizela-Mandela to present her story in her own terms, and possibly to seek amnesty. Speaking about the trial of Jerry Richardson for the murder of Stompie Seipei, Madikizela-Mandela herself indicated on the *Phil Donahue Show* in 1990 that she would welcome the chance to put her case forward. She went on the show during a visit to the United States shortly after Nelson Mandela was released. In her view:

The trial itself was conducted by the press, and it was the family that was on trial. If I had been part of that, the natural thing for the government would have been to charge us. I was not given that opportunity to be charged and to clear myself in a court of law.²⁶

However, she did not take that opportunity and the Commission hearing in December 1997 showed the extent to which Madikizela-Mandela was able to *refuse* to provide a personal narrative that addressed her own agency with regard to violence. In this respect, as in so many others in her life, she did not fall into the categories of women who told their stories. Fiona Ross has described the Truth

²⁵ Alessandro Portelli, *The battle of Valle Giulia: oral history and the art of dialogue*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1997, p. 88.

²⁶ Gilbey, *The lady*, p. 239.

and Reconciliation Commission as «a public performance of memory, loss and grief».²⁷ It was also a highly gendered performance.

Although approximately equal proportions of men and women made statements, for the most part women described the suffering of men whereas men testified about their own experiences of violation[...]women who had been active in opposing the Apartheid State seldom gave public testimony.²⁸

Madikizela-Mandela was therefore among a small minority of women who testified about their own actions.

The presentation of the case against Madikizela-Mandela was itself a gendered narrative. She was testifying about activities within the sphere of her own household, the quintessential private sphere of home, where her authority as head was well-established. Residents in her household, both in the main house and a warren of back rooms, referred to her as “Mummy” and deferred to her judgment. The assaults that she was accused of were not attacks on representatives of the apartheid state or of white power, but young black men who saw themselves as part of the struggle and who sought out Madikizela-Mandela’s home as a place of refuge. It was a home where members of Umkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of the African National Congress, frequently hid from the police and where arms were stored (astonishingly flagrant, considering that the house was continually watched by security police).

There is some glimpse in the Truth and Reconciliation hearing that Madikizela-Mandela’s home was not a safe haven, even for the head of the household. Madikizela-Mandela was paranoid about the people who lived in her house, suspecting several of them, including at least one of the young men assaulted, of being police informers – as indeed, she was constantly under the surveillance of the security police.

At the Truth and Reconciliation hearing into the Mandela United Football Club, Madikizela-Mandela presented a staccato, minimal response to the questions about her implication in assault of activists. Her own lawyer Ishmael Semenya laid out the significance of her testimony in his opening statement:

²⁷ Fiona Ross, *Bearing witness: women and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa*, London, Pluto, 2003, p. 15.

²⁸ Ross, *Bearing witness*, p. 17.

Mr Semenya: I think the country and the world perhaps, has waited for an opportunity that you meet all these allegations and I hope to take you through various aspects of it [...] It would be incumbent on us to address main areas that have arisen [...].²⁹

Mrs Madikizela-Mandela answered in the briefest of terms, continually using the words «ludicrous» and «ridiculous» in response to the allegations. For example, when asked whether she had ordered the death of Stompie Seipei, as claimed by Jerry Richardson, she replied «That is ridiculous and the worst lunacy».³⁰ Asked if the allegation that she had assaulted a woman of whom she was jealous (Phumlile Dlamini was pregnant by a man who was also Madikizela-Mandela's lover), her answer was simple: «I regard that statement as totally ludicrous». In relation to Dr Asvat, Semenya asked «there was an allegation of an altercation, is this correct?». Madikizela-Mandela's response was one line: «It is one of those hallucinations I have heard here for the first time».³¹ In sum, Madikizela-Mandela's testimony provided absolutely no clue as to the nature of her motivations, and her stonewalling attitude was based on her position that all the allegations were simply untrue and therefore required no explanation. Although she repeated her understanding that the boys had taken refuge in her house because they had been sexually assaulted, she denied any involvement in the assault. She offered no alternative explanation for what might have occurred in her home, other than her lack of knowledge. «My evidence is well known, my evidence is that I was not there when they (the boys) were brought there forcibly and that I found three youths there».³²

So hardline was Madikizela-Mandela's refusal to accept any responsibility for what happened in her home that it reduced the chairperson of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Archbishop Tutu, to tears. At the end of the hearing he made an impassioned plea:

I speak as someone who loves you deeply [...]. Many would have rushed out in their eagerness to forgive you and to embrace you. I beg you, I beg you please...You are a great person and you don't

²⁹ South Africa Broadcasting Corporation, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Mandela United Football Club Hearings, sabctrc.saha.org.za/hearing.php?id=56342&t=winnie+mandela&tab=hearings (July 2014).

³⁰ *Ibidem.*

³¹ *Ibidem.*

³² *Ibidem.*

know how your greatness would be enhanced if you were to say sorry, things went wrong, forgive me. I beg you.³³

It was a difficult plea to ignore, even for an implacable Madikizela-Mandela. She responded:

I will take this opportunity to say to the family of Dr Asvat, how deeply sorry I am. To Stompie's mother, how deeply sorry I am. I have said so to her a few years back, when the heat was very hot. I am saying it is true, things went horribly wrong. I fully agree with that and for that part of those painful years when things went horribly wrong and we were aware of the fact that there were factors that led to that, for that I am deeply sorry.³⁴

I was puzzled by Madikizela-Mandela's powerful refusal to use the mode of testimony offered by the Commission, until I stumbled upon a TV interview that she conducted two years later with the Swedish journalist Malou von Sivers. In the interview, she states that she disagreed with the whole premise of the Commission, with the idea that those who fought against apartheid should have to justify their actions. To some extent, she was refusing the narrative that her former husband was comfortably occupying, as the heroic reconciliatory. In the interview, she offered finally her own analysis of the events:

Stompie was killed by their [the state's] own men, the system planted this Jerry Richardson. Frankly I don't give a damn about that because those that believe in the ANC know the truth. He was killed by their agents so that I should be blamed for his death which they still desperately cling to. But the truth is now known.³⁵

When Von Sivers points out that several witnesses have testified on record to her involvement, she replies:

They were all plants by the system. My own life to this day is still of people who were working for the previous regime who still continue to try and undermine those of us who were seen as the backbone of the ANC. It's absolute rubbish. Nothing of the sort happened. I explained to the TRC and to everyone else who was interested in

³³ *Ibidem.*

³⁴ *Ibidem.*

³⁵ Madikizela-Mandela, *Interview with Malou von Sivers*.

that statement that it was made in the context of that time. Anyone who disbelieves that can go jump. I am not prepared to apologise for anything we did whilst we were fighting.

I will continue being the white man's enemy for as long as I am alive.³⁶

Madikizela-Mandela also offers an important clue in this interview as to what might have motivated her to support violence. She refers to her incarceration in solitary confinement between 1967 and 1969.

Q: They tortured you...

Yes I was tortured like everybody else with electrical machines [...]. I was personally interrogated for seven days and seven nights continuously [...] that imprisonment of eighteen months in solitary confinement did actually change me in the sense that I knew that if my mother walked through that door and she was on the other side politically, I knew I would pull a trigger. We were so brutalized by that experience that I then believed in the language of violence and the only to deal with, to fight, apartheid was through the same violence they were unleashing against us and that is how one gets affected by that type of brutality.³⁷

I returned to her notes made during that period of incarceration to find a remarkable personal record of her distress that might have shaped her future actions.³⁸ On 12 May 1969 she was arrested; six months later she was charged with 21 other detainees under the Suppression of Communism Act for planning sabotage. The charges were dismissed four months later but the accused were immediately re-arrested. In July 1970, nineteen of the original accused were once again charged for the same crimes, this time under the Terrorism Act. In September that year they were acquitted. For the whole time that the charges were made, withdrawn and then dismissed, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela was held in solitary confinement.

Her notes from the time, only recently uncovered after the death of her lawyer David Soggott, show the typical prisoner attempt to maintain some kind of control by carefully recording the minutiae of the food she is served, the facilities for washing, counting of hours and days: «I eat before I wash as I would like to eat warm food, then

³⁶ *Ibidem.*

³⁷ *Ibidem.*

³⁸ Madikizela-Mandela, *419 days*.

I wash and get dressed, I wash my teeth with toothpaste if I have it, into the washing bucket. I also wash my mug and spoon into the washing bucket».³⁹

Madikizela-Mandela was interrogated by one of the most notorious policeman, Colonel Swanepoel, who was suspected of having killed other detainees. The torture affected her physical health and led her to consider suicide. Although she does not detail the forms of torture inflicted on her, throughout her notes the consequences are described. Dizziness, confusion, bleeding. She believes that her brain has been damaged. She suffers from what appears to be panic attacks, and may have had a nervous breakdown for which she is hospitalized. In April 1970, in a note headed «My decision», she plans her suicide.

decided that I would commit suicide but would do so gradually so that I should die of natural causes to spare Nelson and the children the pains of knowing I had taken my life. I thought there would be no better method of focusing the world attention on the terror of the Terrorism Act than this. [...] I could leave a farewell note for my husband and my children which I would smuggle during the last few days of my life.⁴⁰

She embarked on a hunger strike with further severe consequences for her health, leading to further hospitalization. It was a period of unimaginable trauma for her, and reading her notes it is evident that at many points she questions her own sanity.

In the epilogue to the notes, written over forty years later, Madikizela-Mandela reflects on the effects of solitary confinement. It is the closest account to a personal narrative that could be found, and it locates her actions in an intense anger both at the way that black people were treated under apartheid as well as in the treatment of women within the national liberation movement. It provides an extraordinary insight into the fury that Madikizela-Mandela continues to feel at the marginalization of women leaders in the African National Congress. She begins by giving a graphic description of solitary confinement as a form of killing that in turn makes people violent:

When we arrived at Pretoria Central Prison, we were all held in a certain section of the prison. Then I was removed and placed on

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

⁴⁰ Madikizela-Mandela, *419 days*, p. 25.

death row, in that cell with three doors, the grille door, then the actual prison door, then another grille door. The sound of that key when they opened the first door, the first grille door, was done in such a way that your heart missed a beat and it was such as shock. You had been all by yourself with dead silence for hours and hours and hours and suddenly there would be this K-AT-LA, K-AT-LA. That alone drove you berserk... You are reduced to a nobody, a non-value. It is like killing you alive [...]. And they wonder why I am like I am. And they have a nerve to say, "Oh Madiba is such a peaceful person, you know. We wonder how he had such a wife who is so violent?". The leadership on Robben Island was never touched; the leadership on Robben Island had no idea what it was like to engage the enemy physically. The leadership was removed and cushioned behind prison walls; they had their three meals a day. In fact, ironically we must thank the authorities for keeping out leadership alive; they were not tortured. They did not know what we were talking about and when we were reported to be violent, engaged in the physical struggle, fighting the Boers underground, they did not understand because none of them had ever been subjected to that, not even Madiba himself –they would not have dared. We were the foot soldiers [...]. Tata could not comprehend how I had become so violent in the eyes of the police. They knew that I was involved with the military wing of the ANC and they knew I was a leader of the struggle underground.⁴¹

This extract is notable for surfacing the identity of *soldier* rather than mother; here Madikizela-Mandela understands her actions as those of a revolutionary member of MK. This aspect of her self-definition is one that she has presented frequently in public, particularly by dressing in combats.

Madikizela-Mandela then reflects on the impact of her marriage to Nelson for her own sense of self-worth, presenting this less as the vehicle for enabling her public status and more as a form of erasure.

I was aware of the fact that suddenly I discovered, "Oh I have no name now" –everything I did as "Mandela's wife". I lost my individuality: "Mandela's wife said this", "Mandela's wife was arrested." It did not matter who the hell I was; it did not matter that I was a Madikizela; it did not matter that I was a human being... So I thought, "My goodness, I've grown up a princess in my own home; I come from the Royal House of Pondoland; and suddenly I've lost my identity because of this struggle. I am going to fix them. I will

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 235.

fight them and I will establish my own identity”. I deliberately did that. I said I was not going to bask in his shadow and be known as “Mandela’s wife”: they were going to know me as Zanyiwe Madikizela. I fought for that. I said, “I will not bask even in his politics. I am going to form my own identity because I never did bask in his ideas”. I had my own mind.⁴²

She ends her account:

Throughout the years of oppression, I think my feelings got blunted because you got so tortured that the pain reached a threshold where you could not feel pain anymore. If you keep pounding and pounding on the same spot the feelings die, the nerves die.⁴³

It is as close to an explanation of what makes violence possible that we might ever get.

Maternalism’s Janus face, assertions of independence or soldier of the revolution?

Analysing Winnie Madikizela-Mandela’s complicities with violence, Rachel Holmes has argued that maternalist nationalism must account for some of the difficulties of explanation. She argues that while the «the use of forms of violence is naturalised within the dynamics of masculine political activism, the language and symbolism of sexual difference make women’s relationship to violence more visible and culturally problematic».⁴⁴ This is a compelling argument. It underscores the point that if women and men are to be treated as equal political actors, then we have to be careful not to reserve certain repertoires of action as inappropriate for women.⁴⁵ In a context

⁴² Madikizela-Mandela, *419 days*, p. 237.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 240.

⁴⁴ Rachel Holmes, *All too familiar: gender, violence and national politics in the fall of Winnie Mandela*, in Alice Myers, Savak Wright (eds.), *No angels: women who commit violence*, London, Pandora, 1996, pp. 97-98.

⁴⁵ The idea that revolutionary violence was necessary re-emerged in internal political organisations in the late 1980s, in response to the ways in which the state was using new technologies of power (including shooting protestors). Winnie Madikizela-Mandela spoke to a powerful faction of young militants advocating violence, including attacking black people who were seen to be collaborators with the apartheid state. These included politicians who worked within the apartheid state system, such as local government officials, and people suspected of breaking consumer boycotts. Jeremy Seekings, *The UDF A history of the United Democratic Front in South Africa, 1983-1991*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 2000.

in which state violence was being intensely perpetrated on political activists against apartheid, and when frustration with slow change from the more moderate elements of the movement was high, why should Madikizela-Mandela *not* support violence in the service of radical change? Arguments against the use of violence, it could be said, must rest not on the idea that women are or should be essentially peacemakers but rather on whether or not violent means are justified at particular moments of struggle.

A different kind of riposte to the claim that violence is a gendered choice might address the content of maternalism. This argument might take the following line: although Madikizela-Mandela was operating within a discourse of maternalism, her interpretations of maternalism might have conformed more to the idea that as mother she had the task of regulating young men into acceptable forms of behavior. Indeed, in her version at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, she was rescuing them from sexual abuse. In a revolutionary context, it could be argued, this use of maternalism acts as a legitimising strategy for developing discipline within a movement. Yet, that discipline was configured around the assertion of violent masculinities, in which revolutionary characteristics included the capacity to act brutally against others. Madikizela-Mandela's authority rested on a gendered conception of what makes a woman a legitimate leader, in which violence was foregrounded rather than the conventional notion of mother-nurturer.

These explanations can all be imputed from the research on the Mandela United Football Club and from several public statements about the need for more violent strategies to be adopted. But we cannot arrive at these conclusions, however valid, from Madikizela-Mandela's own narrative. She refuses accountability and her refusal acts against understanding *her* positionality and *her* processes of making meaning of her life.

What is evident, from the publication of her prison notes and her reflection on those nearly half a century later, are two different aspects of Madikizela-Mandela's personal narrative: the centrality of her identity as a leader of MK, and her sense of the marginalization of women from the powerful decision-making structures of the political movement. Accorded a secondary role as the wife of Nelson, her agency as a committed cadre was always called into question. She had no status within the leadership collective until her husband was released from prison and under his direction she was given positions in both the African National Congress and the new government. She felt misrecognized, reduced –almost in the same

terms as she experienced solitary confinement— as a «nothing».⁴⁶ Stepping outside the agreed parameters of the official party line on what kind of strategies should be adopted was a form of asserting her independence, a form of refusal of the terms of political cad-reship that were available to women in the African National Congress and in society more generally. She justifies her advocacy of violence not within the terms of maternalism, but within those of militarism within the ANC's accepted bounds of disciplined cad-reship. In retrospect, she presents her life as a feminist struggle for political autonomy.

That, at any rate, is how Winnie Madikizela-Mandela presents her choices, defiant to the end. It may not exculpate her from historical responsibility; indeed, it almost certainly does not. The fact that the state was itself violent against her does not explain why she chose to use violence against black children; her silence on that aspect is troubling. Her use of the feminist language of autonomy may read as self-serving and retroactive, if not reactionary. However, in her own narrative Madikizela-Mandela finally does provide a different understanding to the ways in which gender may shape the course of a political career, and the terms on which women may decide on the repertoires of political action.

Abstract: Winnie Madikizela-Mandela is an iconic woman in South African resistance politics. Not only the wife of Nelson Mandela, she was also a member of the ANC's armed wing and supported the use of political violence. In the mid-1980s, she was implicated in the kidnapping and murder of young boys in Soweto. At the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1997, Madikizela-Mandela denied all allegations. Her testimony highlighted a key question: can women's political roles be explored outside of the framework of political maternalism? The article uses fragments of interviews, and a recent essay by Madikizela-Mandela in which she presents a narrative account of the impact of imprisonment and political struggle on her life, as archival sources to explore how she made sense of her political actions. The article argues that although the maternalist paradigm is most frequently used to analyse the biography of Madikizela-Mandela, she herself foregrounds her identities as soldier.

Winnie Madikizela-Mandela è una figura iconica nella politica della resistenza sudafricana. Oltre a essere la moglie di Nelson Mandela, è stata anche membro del braccio armato dell'African National Congress (ANC) e sostenitrice della strategia

⁴⁶ Both Gilbey and Bezdrob note two important facts in their biographies of Winnie: that when she was born, her family reacted with disappointment to the birth of a girl child rather than a boy, and that her father regularly administered corporal punishment. I have not attempted a psychological account of the roots of political violence here, but any account in that vein would no doubt take those facts into account.

delle violenza politica. A metà anni Ottanta fu implicata nel sequestro e assassinio di alcuni ragazzi a Soweto. Nel 1997, dinanzi alla Commissione per la Verità e Riconciliazione, negò ogni addebito. La sua testimonianza pone un interrogativo fondamentale: i ruoli politici delle donne si possono esplorare anche al di fuori di un quadro di maternalismo politico? Il saggio si basa su frammenti di interviste e su un recente saggio in cui la stessa Madizikela-Mandela racconta l'impatto della prigionia e della lotta politica sulla propria esistenza, usati come materiali di archivio al fine di comprendere il senso da lei dato alla propria azione politica. Il saggio sostiene che sebbene nell'analisi della biografia di Madizikela-Mandela solitamente si applichi il paradigma maternalistico, lei stessa proietti di sé una identità di soldato.

Keywords: Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, Nelson Mandela, Sudafrica, African National Congress; maternalismo, donne e violenza, Commissione per la Verità e la Riconciliazione, apartheid; South Africa, maternalism, women and violence, Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

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